THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Searching
February 13, 2000
John M. Buchanan

Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite.... Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.

Augustine
354-430 A.D.
The Confessions

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 30
Mark 1: 29-39
"When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'" (Mark 1:37)

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. We come searching for something to believe in and live for. We come searching for a sense that our lives matter. We search for a community to stand with. As we search, O God, find us. Startle us with your love and grace, mercy and truth. Amen.

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

Those are the opening lines of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield.* They are read to a group of orphans as they snuggle into their beds in an orphanage dormitory in *Cider House Rules*, a remarkable motion picture, based on John Irving's novel of the same name. The story takes place in Maine, in a private orphanage in the 1930's and 40's. As the orphans prepare to go to sleep, the doctor who is director of the orphanage reads to them. Sometimes a young man, Homer, Dr. Larch's assistant, whom he has trained to be a physician, and who is very much a son to the older physician, does the reading. He is the one who reads to the sleepy orphans. "Whether I shall be the hero of my own life . . . these pages must show."

To be the hero of my own life—not a bad goal. To live as fully as I can. To be a player, a participant, to use everything I have, to be all that I can be, to be the hero of my own life. That's what the movie is about.

"Be useful," Dr. Larch tells Homer—who does not want to be the heir apparent and next director of the orphanage. Instead, Homer leaves, does not practice the medicine he knows, does not take care of the orphans who need him, decides to seek his destiny and happiness as an apple picker. Irving's novel and the movie is about that—about the search for a meaningful life, the waiting to know what one should do, and then the moment of truth, the decision to do it, in Dr. Larch's simple terms, the searching for and finding of something useful to do. Or, in Dickens' grander terms, "To be a hero of one's own life."

There's a lot of evidence that we Americans are very much on that quest these days. Someone sent me an article in the *Financial Times* (2/5/00)—and parenthetically, I love it when members and friends send me material because you think I might be interested, or it might be helpful in sermon preparation. A sermon, at its best, is always something of a collaboration between preacher and people, a covenant almost. And when the people actually discover and contribute some of the material that ends up in sermons it becomes

a true collaboration. So don't ever hesitate to send me what you think might be helpful. This article was provided by a good friend who is not a member, but thinks like one, and knows me well enough to know that I'm probably not going to be perusing the pages of *The Financial Times* although he probably wishes I would.

The article is "Why Happiness is Priceless," and it's about something called "Luxury Fever," the now thoroughly documented reality that Americans are both unhappier and richer than ever. "The anxiety of affluence" has prompted sociological studies that document what we always knew, or thought we did, namely that rising incomes do not translate automatically to increased happiness. In fact, something of the reverse seems to be happening. The more we have the unhappier we become. The article is careful not to glamorize poverty. Rich people may be stressed and anxious but not as much as poor people. But happiness is, in fact, priceless. Economist Robert Frank remembers his term of service in the Peace Corps in Nepal. "My one-room house had no heat, no electricity, no indoor toilet, no running water . . . and yet I experienced a feeling of prosperity."

Perhaps not so dramatically, but who can't remember a time of relatively modest financial resources, making a fraction of what you currently earn, living in a tiny apartment, with a hot plate and running water only in the bathroom so you either carried water or did dishes in the bathtub, looking for bargains in the food section, getting by finding amusement and entertainment without cost, walking a lot, taking the bus instead of a cab, and experiencing that memory today as pleasant, full, happy?

The New York Times, which I do read, ran a major feature not long ago which showed pictures of Trinity Church Wall Street amidst its neighbor sky-scrapers under the headline, "It's No Longer Just the Economy, Stupid," and reported that "America is doing well by any material measure. But there are signs amid the prosperity that people are asking whether this is all there is." The article also cited sociological research documenting that we are paying a high price in stress, anxiety, family and marital dysfunction, for our affluence and that perhaps the most important task in front of us is to determine whether or not we can sustain it, "it" being this aggressive economy and the frantic, hurried, almost out-of-control work and life style it has created, without losing something precious about our humanity.

Wade Clark Roof is a University of California sociologist of religion—which he defines as a parent with two children who sends one to Sunday School and keeps the other at home as a "control group." Roof studies young people mostly, Baby Boomers, Generation X. It was Roof who coined the phrase "A Generation of Seekers." Young adults, he reports, are seekers, not joiners: concerned far more about finding meaning and purpose than belonging to institutions, discovering meaningful activity rather than engaging in rituals. Baby Boomers are sometimes criticized for being so individualistic: "It's about me, my life, my feelings, my fulfillment." But Roof reports that the search is genuine. They "will commit themselves to religious activities and organizations," he reports, "including traditional congregations, when they feel there is some authentic connection with their lives and experiences . . . They (Boomers) are hungry to find ways to commit themselves." (*A Generation of Seekers,* p.246-247)

"Everyone is searching for you," the disciples of Jesus are reported to have said to him, which sounds terribly consistent with this theme. The occasion is at the very beginning of the story. In fact, it is a precious portrait of a day—perhaps the first day—in his public life. Jesus of Nazareth—30 years old, son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter, after a deeply spiritual experience which resulted in his baptism—gathered a few followers in Galilee and visited in the hometown of one of them, Simon, who would be called Peter. Capernaum was the town. In the Synagogue he had a frightening encounter with a man with an unclean spirit, we might say mentally, emotionally ill. Jesus healed him, and at once the news spread through the town. It was the Sabbath. They went to Simon's home. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her and she, elderly mother-in-law, did what my late mother-in-law used to do; and what elderly mothers-in-law still have a way of doing, went to the kitchen and started making dinner. And now, the word raced through Capernaum and beyond, and they came, bringing their sick, and lame and imperfect, and blind and fevered, the babies and the frail elderly, at sundown, to that small house in Capernaum. I've always loved that image, the sick and needy coming to Jesus at sundown, in the cool of the evening, after Sabbath. And this time through the text I discovered why. That's the church. That's an image of a church that I love—the place where human need, whatever it is, encounters Jesus Christ, the place where the human search, the quest for happiness, fulfillment, wholeness, salvation, leads.

"Everyone is searching for you," they told him. It was true. It is true. Our culture is far too secular, or at least thinks it is, far too sophisticated to use the language and speak his name, but everyone is searching for him.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says we North Americans are on four quests actually:

The quest for Moral authenticity
Meaningful community
Transcendence and mystery
Meaning.

In a little book, *Why Christian,* Hall imagines a conversation with a student, a composite from his teaching career at McGill University, a prototype seeker:

"I'm not interested in getting to heaven," the student says. "In fact, I'm doing everything I can to avoid it . . .so when I hear 'saved' people talking about how great it will be when they are dead, I have to wonder what they must think about their life if they're so enthusiastic about wrapping it up. . .I'm also not that worried about hell . . .and I don't feel all that guilty."

Professor Hall asks: "What do you worry about?"

And the student responds: "Well, fairly often actually, I feel superfluous . . .Who needs me? A large number of my contemporaries can't even find any decent work and it's going to get worse . . .Who needs me? Does life have any meaning?" (*Why Christian,* p.40)

Professor Hall comments: "What most Westerners need to be saved from today is not dread of death or a crippling sense of guilt. It's the gnawing suspicion that human beings may be purposeless—superfluous." (p.47)

Notice now what happens in Capernaum—note the action, the news which spread rapidly and results in "everyone searching for him."

Jesus notices human need of the most basic type—a man's mental or emotional dysfunction, an elderly woman's physical impairment.

Jesus not only notices, but cares enough to feel compassion, takes into himself the human pain and fear of a mentally ill man and an aging woman whose station in life could almost be defined as superfluous. Who needs her anymore? "Who needs me?", she asks every single day of her life, living under her son-in-law's roof, always in the way, trying somehow to be useful.

Jesus made them well.

Both were restored—to useful life. Simon's mother-in-law gets up off her sick bed and goes to work serving.

Everybody hears about it and comes searching for him.

Could it be that it is what we are searching for? Some sense that God notices us, knows our need? Some sense that our lives have meaning precisely because God notices, that we are not alone in whatever need we have? Some sense that our personal restoration, our wholeness is related to getting up from wherever we are lying and finding a way to serve others?

Could it be that what we are searching for, all of us, great and small, important and insignificant, titled and anonymous—what we are most searching for is the meaning that comes from being useful—to be the hero of our own life?

"Be useful," Dr. Larch admonishes Homer in *Cider House Rules* . And every night he reads to the orphans, forlorn, some attractive, some not so attractive, all wanting desperately to be adopted, which means to be loved and wanted by someone; some who will never be adopted, some awkward and physically impaired, some sick and who will not live. And every night, after he reads to them, and covers are pulled up and lights out, he stands in the doorway and says:

"Good night, you Princes of Maine!
Good night, you Kings of New England!"

That's what we search for—a sense that we matter, that there is meaning to our lives because someone wants us and loves us, someone to say" Good night you princes and princesses of Maine," and, because of that, because we know ourselves loved and wanted, a way of being useful, a way to get up and serve—a way to become the hero of our own lives.

That's what we search for. There is, of course, someone who loves and wants us; whose love can restore us and give us confidence and meet our deepest needs and lift us up from where we are lying, waiting, and put us to work and make us the hero-heroine of our own lives. Jesus Christ is his name.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
February 13, 2000
The Reverend William Golderer

Gracious and ever-loving God, our maker, defender, redeemer and friend, we gather to rejoice in all that you have done and all you continue to do to reveal yourself to us. Behind the majesty of a storm, you stand. Above the star-lit canopy of space, you reign. Beneath the desert sands and icy waters, you live and move. Within our hearts, You dwell.

You have breathed life into us that we might know you and praise you. And so we lament with the psalmist when you hide your face from us. Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, but often ours is the longing. We search for assurances of your care for us. We long for relief from things which distract us from our callings. We are in constant need of your unmistakable and unrelenting love for us.

We pray this day for those who govern around the world. That they might use their power and influence in the service of all. We pray for our President and his advisors, and all those who are seeking to hold public office—that they might have the stamina for their rigorous schedules.

We pray for this city and especially all who feel lost in it. Grant that connection and comfort might chase away their feelings of estrangement.

We pray for your church around the world and for this congregation—that it might faithfully serve as a reliable guide for all who seek encounter with you. We pray for those we know who are hurting this day. For those who feel alone or empty inside. For all for whom tears are always near the surface....whose hearts are breaking from grief or regret. For those who are wrestling with the demons of addiction or disease. For all whom we know who are weary of their struggles and are losing hope. We ask that they might find healing, find encouragement, find you.

We pray for ourselves—that we might always persist in our search for relationship with you. That we will push past distractions and disillusionment and find ourselves at home and at rest in your care. We lift up to you now in silence the things which are pressing upon our hearts.

(pause)

With confidence that in seeking after you, we will truly find you. That in knocking on the door, you will swing it open wide and greet us as loved and lost children, we join together in the prayer your Son taught us to pray.....